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WASHINGTON (Reuters) - The World Bank's absence from Iraq under the U.S.-led occupation drew criticism on Wednesday from an influential congressional panel, which moved to pressure the lender to return its staff and speed the disbursement of donations for Iraq's reconstruction.

The U.S. House of Representatives Appropriations Subcommittee on Foreign Relations passed an amendment to a \$19.4 billion foreign-aid bill that would require the U.S. Treasury Department to report on the bank's Iraq staffing and aid disbursements.

"The amendment that I offered and that was accepted was criticizing the World Bank policy on deploying no staff, calling attention to the slow disbursements and requiring the Treasury Department to do a report to the committee by January," said Rep. Mark Kirk, a Republican from Illinois.

The subcommittee, which sets funding for the U.S. contribution to the World Bank, did not provide copies of the amendment.

The panel's action was seen as move to pressure the World Bank through the Treasury Department, the government agency which manages U.S. participation in the international lender.

The World Bank withdrew its staff from Iraq last year after the bombing of the United Nations' headquarters in Baghdad. President James Wolfensohn has said he will not send staff back until it is safe. In the meantime the bank is doing Iraq work from an office in Jordan.

A donors conference in Madrid last year raised \$32 billion in loans and grants to rebuild war-torn Iraq. The United Nations and the World Bank agreed to manage the money in an international trust fund.

The bill also cut overall funding for the bank by \$90 million from last year's levels and by \$224

million from President Bush's budget request. The subcommittee gave no explanation for the cut.

In a blow for Bush's aid policies toward poor countries, the panel cut a separate \$200 million bonus payment for the bank's lending arm for the poorest nations.

The Treasury Department had been pushing for the extra money after the bank was found to have met and exceeded performance targets at its concessional lending arm, the International Development Association.